

The Cincinnati Art Museum Bulletin



DECEMBER 1952



A NEW INTERPRETATION OF AN OLD PICTURE

In the Cincinnati Art Museum there hangs a picture by the Italian painter Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), which is among the most valuable treasures of the Museum. Hitherto it was generally said to depict the Cumaean Sibyl selling her writings to the Roman king Tarquin. With such an interpretation one wonders why the king does not wear a crown and why there is nothing regal about his uncouth beard or dress. Why, on the other hand, is the woman, who is only a sibyl, that is, a kind of prophetess, adorned with a crown? Why is only one scroll visible whereas, according to legend, the sibyl sold the king three books? And finally, why is this sale transacted in front of a portal and not in the palace itself? On account of all these contradictions I suggest a different interpretation of this picture: it represents Esther and Mordecai discussing the decree ordering the destruction of the Persian Jews.

In the Book of Esther we are told that Esther, "beautiful and lovely," as the Bible says, wins the favor of the Persian king Ahasuerus. Not aware of her origin, he crowned her queen, in place of the rejected Vashti. Now Esther had a cousin and guardian, Mordecai, who, as a faithful Jew, pays homage to only One God and therefore refuses to bow before the proud courtier Haman. Haman, furious, plans revenge, not only against Mordecai but against all Jews of the Persian kingdom. He prevails upon the king to issue an edict to kill all Jews on one day. A copy of this edict reaches Mordecai, and he, in his desperation, strews ashes upon his head, tears his garment, and clothes his body in sackcloth, according to Jewish practice. In this attire he goes to seek his niece to bring her word of this calamity, but he is not admitted to the palace because, according to Persian etiquette, "no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth." Now Mordecai and Esther communicate through messengers, a sequence that can hardly be reproduced in a single picture. Therefore Mantegna has made a very slight variation in the action: Esther herself hastens to the portal to speak with her cousin. He, the decree in his hands, beseeches his ward to implore the king's grace. Esther replies that no one may come before the king uninvited, by penalty of death. Mordecai becomes more insistent: she,

"Esther and Mordecai," by Andrea Mantegna, Italian (1431-1506), oil on canvas, H. 21¾" x W. 19", Mary M. Emery Collection, accessions number 1927-406.



Esther Scroll, hand-painted on parchment, Hebrew Union College Library, Cincinnati. Photograph by Schalita Studio.

too, will not escape the general Jewish fate, and perhaps God has raised her to be queen to save her people. Whereupon Esther promises her uncle to go before the king, at the risk of her life. Ahasuerus receives his wife with favor, and finally it comes about that Haman is killed instead of Mordecai, and instead of the Jews their enemies throughout the land.

The scene where Ahasuerus extends his sceptre to Esther as a sign of grace is a favorite with painters. But Mantegna has obviously chosen the earlier scene where cousin and

ward discuss the king's decree with lively gestures. One can now understand why the conversation takes place before a portal: Mordecai, wrapped in sackcloth, is not allowed to go further than the entrance to the palace. Also his long, full beard can be understood: as a mourning Jew he refrains from cutting it. His shoes and draped trousers, which at the same time serve as stockings, mark him as a Persian Jew, because such shoes and such trousers are repeatedly found on monuments representing Persians. Also the turban points to Persia. The cap worn on top of it surely suggests the pointed hat worn by the Jews of Europe during the middle ages and probably still at the time of Mantegna, at least by Jews from among the poorer sections.

Even the decree of the king is not an ordinary scroll but of the kind with which the Jews of that time and of later times were familiar. The Jews celebrate the deliverance of their Persian brethren by a special festivity called Purim. On that holiday they read the book of Esther, not from a printed book but from a parchment scroll upon which the story of Esther is written by hand. These scrolls have proportions of length and height resembling those on the picture, and also the remarkable width of the columns corresponds to that shown on the painted scroll illustrated above. The painter could certainly have represented the king's decree on a scroll of smaller dimensions. But many of his paintings prove that Mantegna is a stickler for historical exactness. Therefore, just as he has made the appearance of Mordecai follow historical custom, so he wanted to give the scroll an authentic look and chose the Jewish scroll of Esther as a pattern.

Mantegna has frequently painted outstanding women of world history: Judith and Dido, Sophonisba and Tucia. With this picture his group of heroines is enlarged by Esther, who, through her courage, saved her fellow Jews from destruction.

FRANZ LANDSBERGER

Curator of the Jewish Museum, Hebrew Union College

T.S. BOYS' LONDON AND QUEEN VICTORIA'S ETCHING

Millions of Americans in the last few years have had the opportunity of becoming almost as familiar with the great cities of Europe as with their own through the medium of television. A century ago a similar substitute for travel was provided by certain artists who lithographed and etched "views" of different cities. One of the most notable among them was Thomas Shotter Boys (1803-1874) who is famous for *Picturesque Views of Paris, Ghent, Antwerp, Rouen, etc.*, one of the finest of the early productions in which the new medium of color lithography was used. Three years later in 1842 he issued another series, *London As It Is*.

The accidental discovery of a copy of *London As It Is* in the lower stack of the Museum's Library emphasizes the fact that an art museum is a treasure-house not only of great masterpieces but of significant art objects. The bound volume of 25 views and a title page was presented to the Library of the Cincinnati Museum Association by Reuben R. Springer, December 14, 1884. It is marked No. 25 and is one of the earliest gifts to the Museum, the first unit of which was constructed two years later. The inner cover bears the bookplate of Ricardi Duffield, S.T.B. Since the backbone of the binding was broken the lithographs could be readily removed and matted for exhibition.

The title page reads, "Original Views of London as it is, drawn from Nature expressly for this work and lithographed by Thomas Shotter Boys. Exhibiting its Principal streets and characteristic accessories, public buildings in connection with the leading thoroughfares, etc. With historical and descriptive notices of the views by Charles Ollier" (text in English and French). Some authorities claim that the lithographs were printed in color, Ottley, for example, describing the method as "simple tinted lithography in sepia," others saying that they were colored by hand. Actually the plates were printed in two colors: black and a neutral gray-brown as in the Museum's example which has the pin-holes for registering the paper on each stone. Subsequently, brighter colors were added by hand, but only on some copies (possibly by Boys), which explains the contradiction. (Those colored in Boys' time were done on thin paper laid on heavier stock.) Actually, these delightful, accurate views by Boys are quite satisfactory in the simple printed colors. The artist used lithograph crayon and tusche (lithotint in which the crayon is applied in liquid form) and the effects are comparable to pen and wash drawings.



Esther Scroll, hand-painted on parchment, Hebrew Union College Library, Cincinnati. Photograph by Schalita Studio.

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*"Regent Street Looking
Toward the Quadrant," by
Thomas Shutter Boys,
(1803-1874), lithograph
printed in color, from
"London As It Is," 1842.*

Boys' views of London are more than a visual record of a world capital; they have an atmosphere, a mood, even an occasional touch of whimsy as in "Regent Street Looking Toward the Quadrant" (illustrated) where a placard in the lower left calls for a "vote for Boys." The views are of London as it was more than one hundred years ago, and as it is still in part. Although single plates appear on the market, the complete set is more difficult to obtain. Boys' work is also important because it shows the superiority of textural qualities of printed color as against the hand-colored print, not only in lithography but in engraving and in woodcut. As a pioneer in color lithography Boys was the forerunner of Toulouse-Lautrec and his contemporaries, and of the current revival.

At the same time that Boys was producing his views of London in lithography, Queen Victoria was making etchings for her own pleasure and also made a lithograph. She is one of a line of famous amateur artists which includes Marie de Medici who in 1587 designed a woodcut discovered not long ago (of which only one impression is known, belonging to the Bibliothèque Nationale); Prince Rupert (1619-1682) who brought mezzotint engraving to England; Madame Pompadour and Goethe who practiced etching; and the painters Winston Churchill and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Queen Victoria pursued her hobby apparently for a period of ten years (from about the time of her accession to the throne in 1837), an interest which she shared with her Prince Consort Albert. Her Majesty learned etching from Sir Edwin Landseer and water-color painting from Richard Westall, her art training having begun in child-

hood. She also had drawing lessons from Edward Lear who is best remembered as the author of "The Owl and the Pussycat" and other nonsense rhymes.

The Herbert Greer French bequest includes one of her etchings, "Queen Victoria Feeding Princess Victoria" (illustrated), the daughter who later became Empress of Germany. It is signed in the plate, "VR del 23/8/1841" and was titled by her as "Victoria". Despite obvious faults in draughtsmanship the etching is appealing in its simplicity, "drawn from life by Her Majesty August 23, 1841 and etched by the Queen", a reflection, perhaps, of the fashionable popularity of the medium in England at that time. (A generation earlier lithography had been the rage among the aristocrats of Paris and a lithograph press was even set up in the Tuileries).

The Queen never intended that her etchings should be offered to the public, but some impressions were given to distinguished persons. A set of the Queen's etchings was shown at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1878. (Sir Alfred T. Goshorn, who was president of the commission, was knighted by the Queen and decorated by other European governments for his services; later he became the first Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum.) Then, about fifty years ago Frederick Keppel came in an unexplained manner into possession of thirty-four etchings made by the Queen and exhibited them in his New York gallery. Others were exhibited in London in 1925 and in San Francisco in 1935 at the Sowers Print Rooms. The Queen's etchings, one can justly say, are no better and no worse than those of many other amateurs, yet Keppel prophesied rightly that Queen Victoria would not be immortalized as an etcher; but since people have a natural curiosity about the lives of famous personages, her etchings will not be forgotten, because they were made by a queen.

- GUSTAVE VON GROSCHWITZ

Queen Victoria's Etchings:

"Etchings by Her Majesty and H.R.H. Prince Albert," *Art Journal*, X (1848), p. 351. "Prints by Queen Victoria Seen in America," *Art Digest*, X (November 1, 1935), p. 22. A. Davidson, Edward Lear, Penguin Books, 1950, p. 43. F. Keppel, *The Golden Age of Engraving*, New York, 1910, pp. 104-106. J. Laver, *A History of British and American Etching*, London, 1929, pp. 46, 183. M. H. Spielmann, "Her Late Majesty Queen Victoria and the Fine Arts," *Magazine of Art*, XXIV (1901), p. 193. Thieme-Becker, *Künstler-Lexikon*, XXXIV, p. 331.

Boys, London As It Is

Art Index, Several brief articles not mentioned below. R. M. Burch, *Colour Printing and Colour Printers*, London, 1910, pp. 194-195. R. Barton, "T. S. Boys, the Rowlandson of Victorian London," *The Antiquarian*, XVII (1931), pp. 41-44. H. Stokes, "Thomas Shotton Boys," *Walker's Quarterly*, No. 18 (c. 1927), pp. 27-30. R. V. Tooley, *Some English Books with Coloured Plates*, London, 1935, No. 71. *Examples at other museums: Cleveland Museum, printed in color with hand-coloring; Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, printed in color with hand-coloring; Metropolitan Museum, printed in color with 6 also hand-colored; New York Public Library, printed in color.*



"Queen Victoria Feeding Princess Victoria," by Queen Victoria, (1819-1901), etching, dated August 23, 1841.



HILAIRE-GERMAIN EDGAR DEGAS, FRENCH (1834-1917)

The Ballet: pastel and gouache on paper mounted on cardboard, H. 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ " 22.5 cm., W. 6 $\frac{5}{8}$ " 17 cm., 1884-6, signed lower left, "Degas," accessions number 1946.105, Mary Hanna Collection, Cincinnati Art Museum.

Collections: Roger Marx, Paris; Dikran Khan Kelekian, Paris and New York; Arnold Genthe, New York; Dikran Khan Kelekian, New York; Carroll Carstairs, New York; Mary Hanna, Cincinnati; Cincinnati Art Museum.

Exhibited: Messrs. Arthur Tooth and Sons, London, England, 1936; Cincinnati Art Museum, 1946-47.

Published: Roger Marx Sales Catalog, May 11-12, 1914, Galerie Manzi, Paris, ill. No. 127; Illustrated Catalog of the Notable Collection of Modern French Pictures . . . of Dikran Khan Kelekian, 1922, New York, The American Art Association, ill. No. 91; Illustrated London News, July 11, 1936, ill. p. 62; The Art News, New York, May 1, 1937, ill. p. 19; Bulletin of the Cincinnati Art Museum, July, 1938, ill. cover; Degas Dancers, by Lillian Browse, The Studio Publications, Inc., New York, 1949, ill. plate 135.

THE BALLET

Behind the previous array of seemingly dry facts, arranged in a conventional manner, lies much of interest, not only in the life of the scholarly recluse who executed it, but in the lives of those who once owned this pastel, "The Ballet," a gift of Mary Hanna, which was recently hung with the French paintings in gallery 42.

So much has been written of Degas' misanthropic behavior, that it is a welcome change to read what has been said in contradiction. In the year of Degas' death, 1917, Walter Sickert, an English artist, wrote his personal recollections of the Frenchman. He reported that the artist was a man of impeccable politeness who, in all the years he had known him, had been severe to his friends in only two instances, both with clear justification.

"Degas," he wrote, "had the good-nature and the high spirits that attend a sense of great power exercised in the proper channel, and therefore profoundly satisfied. The sensation that seemed to me to be perpetual with him was comparable to the irrepressible laugh of a boxer who gets in blow after blow exactly as he intended... His intellectual vitality, assimilative and creative, was so intense and so absorbing that it seemed he could not be bothered with any of the expensive apparatus of vanity and pleasure which, to less generously endowed natures, seems a necessary compensation. There was his work, and, when his eyes were tired, there was conversation, there were endless rambles through the streets of Paris, and long rides in and on omnibuses. 'I don't like riding in a carriage,' remarked Degas. 'You can't see anybody. That's why I prefer the bus. You can see the people.'"

To this young artist, Degas made the following succinct and penetrating remarks:

"I want to look through the keyhole."

"Perhaps I see only the animal in women."

"One conveys truth with a lie."

His admiration for the work of Ingres has often been recorded and Ingres' advice to him to "always make lines, many lines," advice he never forgot, always practiced. For Degas clearly saw the danger of Impressionism being lost in color for its own sake. Like Cézanne he withdrew, Cézanne to the provinces to add structure to the freshness of Impressionism, Degas to the solitude of his Paris studio to capture in line his candid observations of dancers, circus performers, musicians, prostitutes, and jockeys. In his twenty-third year Degas

wrote, "It seems to me that today if the artist wishes to be serious—to cut out a little original niche for himself, or at least preserve his own innocence of personality—he must once more sink himself in solitude. There is too much talk and gossip."

Degas, an avid collector, owned sketches by Ingres and paintings by Gauguin, Manet, Delacroix and El Greco. The first owner of the Museum's pastel was another collector of distinction, the vanguard critic Roger Marx, who wrote brilliant articles in defense of the new artists. His efforts in behalf of Rodin's recognition were great and far reaching.

A year after Marx's death, in 1914, his famous collection was sold and "The Ballet" was purchased by the late Dikran Khan Kelekian, whose son in a recent letter wrote, "This picture was bought by us in 1914 at the sale of the Roger Marx collection in Paris. My father was very fond of the picture and it used to hang in our private picture gallery at home. In the spring of 1918, when the Germans were approaching Paris, I took the picture with several others to the south of France for safekeeping. When the danger was over, it was brought back to its place in our Paris home. It remained there until 1922 when it was shipped to America with the rest of the collection to be sold at auction."

The 1922 Kelekian auction was attended by Arnold Genthe, a good friend of the famous dealer. Genthe in his memoirs wrote, "Kelekian's auction of his modern French paintings caused much excitement and consternation. Kelekian is a unique figure in the art world. No other dealer has such catholicity of taste and knowledge. His interest ranges from early Egyptian and Assyrian sculptures...to Coptic textiles, Chinese paintings, Gothic marbles, Persian potteries and miniatures, Flemish tapestries, to French paintings from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the latest modernists. Since he is concerned more with art than money values, and has no patience with anything inferior or of doubtful origin, he was not popular with a certain group of dealers and systematic attempts were made to spread the impression that the French paintings in the Kelekian collection did not represent the artists at their best, though anyone with an eye for quality must have realized that this was untrue. It was a regular conspiracy and the sale was an absolute slaughter."

Among the works Genthe purchased was "The Ballet." It was a fitting act, for Genthe, then a famous photographer, was one of the first to attempt to capture the motion of the dance in still photographs. Degas accomplished this in his pastels of dancers and moreover used photographs to help plan many of his works. Genthe was the exclusive photographer of Isadora Duncan and is remembered today most of all for his series of photographs of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. How long he kept the Degas pastel is not

known, but after purchasing it he was prevailed upon by Kelekian to exchange it for some Chinese paintings.

In 1936 the picture crossed the Atlantic again, this time to be displayed in London and reproduced in full color in the *Illustrated London News*, in which it was reported that it attracted much attention at Tooth gallery. In the following year it was purchased by Miss Mary Hanna of Cincinnati from the New York dealer Carroll Carstairs, to whom Kelekian sold it after the London showing. Miss Hanna's distinctive collection of oil paintings can be seen today in the Museum. Her equally fine pastels and watercolors are represented in part today by this distinctive and delicate pastel.

The Museum's new Degas is probably the last of a series of three. There are two other versions of this work, the first a pencil drawing, somewhat smaller and probably the earliest, the other a pastel of around 1879, about the same size.

EDWARD H. DWIGHT

Degas' "The Ballet":

Artists on Art, compiled and edited by Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, New York, 1945, p. 308. A. Genthe, As I Remember, New York, 1936, p. 142. F. Lawton, The Life and Work of Auguste Rodin, New York, 1907, pp. 62-63. W. Sickert, "Degas," The Burlington Magazine, November 1917, pp. 183-191. H. J. Wechsler, Lives of Famous French Painters, New York, 1952, pp. 78-91.

Front cover, left to right, top, "The Virgin Receiving the Annunciation" (Lehrs 3), Martin Schongauer; "The Annunciation" (Lehrs 4), Mair von Landshut; bottom, "The Nativity and Adoration of the Shepherds" (Hind 63), Nicoletto Roselli da Modena; "Madonna and Child" (Hind 1), Andrea Mantegna.

Back cover, left to right, top, "The Visitation" (Dodgson 44), Albrecht Dürer; "The Adoration of the Kings" (Lehrs 26), Master E. S.; bottom, "The Flight into Egypt" (Lehrs 7), Martin Schongauer; "The Presentation in the Temple" (Hind 279), Rembrandt van Rijn. These prints are from the Bequest of Herbert Greer French.

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The Art Museum is one of the four institutions participating in the United Fine Arts Fund which ensures the continuity of the arts in Cincinnati.

